

Trash: debris, garbage, junk, kelter, litter, offal, rubbish, sweepings, waste debris, dreck, dust, muck, mullock, outswEEPings, pelf, rifferaff, sculch, spilth, swill, waste, dump, dustheap, rejectamenta, scraps, offscouring.

Mongo: object thrown away and then recovered. Anyone who roots through trash. It might seem French, Chinese or African, but it is American slang; it is a word coined in New York to define objects that have been thrown out and are then gathered and saved.... Walter Benjamin wrote that 'for a real collector all of an object's background participates in a magical encyclopaedia whose quintessence is the destiny of the object itself.'

For the term *mongo*: from *Mongo: Adventures in Trash* by Ted Botha, Bloomsbury, New York 2004.

Introduction

Dedicated to Giulio Carlo Argan and Giorgio Manganelli, teachers and friends who became distracted and moved away

The art of *showing* is to ask—of oneself and others—questions before you resolve them.

The questions to be resolved here are the chief motive for yet another publication that can still lay claim to saying something new. In this case, the first question is: why did the artists of the last century employ and why do they continue to employ—in some cases systematically, in others episodically—trash?

Trash that has been incorporated, photographed, 'treated', emphasised, camouflaged or 'corrected', but which still remains trash, that is, something that belongs in a garbage can or a dump. And why, when writing about art, should we find ourselves considering trash?

Certainly not because of a sort of peregrine dandyism. Instead, let us reflect on the fact that we ourselves have been discarded or rejected by other human beings; more or less on a daily basis, we are forced to recover, scrape together and reassemble fragments of ourselves.

As we look at Alberto Burri's used sacks or the details of corpses photographed in the morgue by Andres Serrano, we might recall the voice of Cathy Berberian, capable of blending fine music with 'pop' music; we might listen to a composition by Paolo Castaldi; we might reread certain lists by Bohumil Hrabal or certain 'frisbees' by Giulia Niccolai; we might think back to certain film sequences by Abel Ferrara or other vocal collages by Meredith Monk... and, as we do, we might realise that twentieth-century culture is packed with recovered material, reuses and contaminations, shreds, fragments, discards and 'noise'.

And so it is not only in Picasso, Tatlin and Marinetti, nor only in Mimmo Rotella, Louise Nevelson or Christian Boltanski that we find a special interest in the discarded, detritus, the slag heap. The visual arts do not claim to be a territory unto themselves; the

custom of blending and contrasting themes and media from high culture with those of the mass media and pop culture has flourished and expanded steadily over the past hundred years, in other fields of artistic expression, fields that have digested and absorbed trash, employing it in a broad array of technologies.

To paraphrase a 1966 text by Giorgio Manganelli, we might say that 'trash is language'. It is also the tragic face of consumerism.

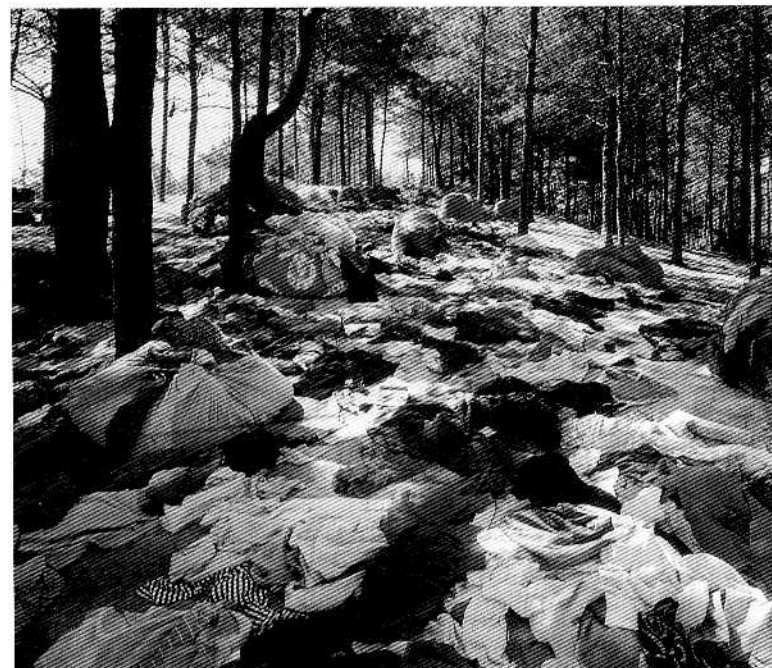
To save and preserve trash, to try to hold onto it, to help it to survive by rescuing it from the void, from nothingness, from the dissolution to which it is destined, the desire to leave a trace, a sign, a hint for posterity, involves a psychological dimension that is also political. It may be that it is both a psychological and a sociological phenomenon at the same time. Certainly this psychology and this sociology are not devoid of significance in art: it may be interesting to explore the meanings in question.

What We Mean by Trash

In museums and galleries around the world, we have seen artworks made with trash, garbage, scraps, slag, leftovers, junk and waste (domestic waste, urban waste, hospital waste, industrial waste, nuclear waste...). In recent years, there has been a great deal of discussion of *trash* (the English word is borrowed in this context by many languages).

Tommaso Labranca, the author of a successful little book on the subject in 1994, perceptively defined trash as an unsuccessful emulation, a failed imitation. Labranca states that the emergence of trash is necessarily linked to poor timing and offers a 'syllogis-

Kimsooja,
*Sewing into
Walking.
Dedicated to
the Victims of
Kwangju, 1995,*
I Kwangju
Biennial
© Fukuoka Sakae

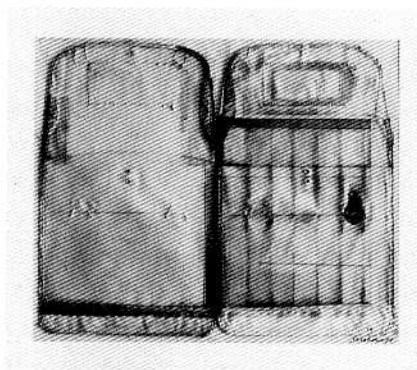


tic' explanation: 1) a pillar of trash is emulation; 2) because emulation refers to a previously existing model, it necessarily arrives too late; 3) trash is the expression of a belated arrival.

In the artworks selected, we do not find the middle tones of the process of imitation, nothing has been vulgarised by the conceits of style, equivocal indulgences, mass-produced or over-ambitious mystifications. We are in the face of what, then, constitutes the antipodes of trash-culture: trash that becomes language through artworks in which it is the expression of visual culture and much more.

As we know, trash had already been used in many artworks of the avant-garde of the turn of the twentieth century—from the Futurists and Kurt Schwitters to Picasso and Marcel Duchamp: artworks whose right to be considered art no one has contested for a long time now. The intention, at the time, was to make it clear that even with scrap paper, cord, twine, junk and used ship and train tickets, that is, with material that was considered of low value, it was possible to make aesthetic creations in the exact same manner as if noble, traditional materials had been used instead.

es
amps,
cousu et
ure acrylique
su cousu
(coche), 1985



A gesture of protest and provocation. When we look back at the artworks that caused scandals in the first half of the century, we cannot even sense the 'surprise'; we see in them nothing but formal skill. Of course, it is contemporary art that causes doubts and debate.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the use of trash was in fact the rule rather than the exception: irony, a hint of nostalgia to which we should add, along with a general denunciation of consumerism, a social critique; let us consider the trends and theorising of Fluxus, Poesia Visiva, Nouveau Réalisme and Pop Art, for instance.

The 1980s and 1990s, on the other hand, reveal not only a poetic determination to be able to choose used objects, outdated objects, or actual trash, in a character that has evolved to sarcasm, but also the sense of an apotropaic ceremonial, a sort of exorcism to ward off our ulcerous anxieties of this end of the century. The artworks selected have no debts to post-Surrealism and post-Dada, to bricolage, borrowing, plagiarism or quotation, to pastiche or patchwork: they are creations in which the age-old enchantment of inventing images with discarded objects continues to flourish.

Forms with a classical inspiration coexist, mingled and juxtaposed, with popular forms and waste objects in a very singular syncretism, in a hybrid that can be exquisite or dramatic—but always explosive: a coexistence that asks itself, and us, about the meaning of the choice of trash.

Artists 'treat' trash, in some cases with classic results (Vladimir Vladimirovich Dimitriev, Rougena Zatkova, Paul Joostens, Varvara Stepanova, Alberto Burri, Antoni Tàpies, Salvatore Scarpitta, Andres Serrano, Claudio Parmiggiani and Giuseppe Maraniello); others annotate trash, pulverise it, emphasise it (Meret Oppenheim, Eileen Agar, Ivan Pougny, Herbert Schürmann, Gianfranco Baruchello, Joseph Cornell, Claudio Costa, Gérard Deschamps, Jackson MacLow, Jannis Kounellis, Louise Nevelsen, Louise Bourgeois, Franco Vaccari, Ben Vautier, Charlotte Moorman and Franz West) in such a way that the spectator should grasp the hints, elusive and alluring, that indicate a specific area in which there lies, incorporated or shamelessly exhibited, in any case miraculously active, a relic. As in any art form, when an enchantment functions, emotions are diffused.

Cornelia Parker,
*Thirty Pieces
of Silver*,
Hertfordshire,
1988



Trash

'The predilection for used things over factory-new objects is a product of the belief that not everything that is brand new is necessarily to be used and not everything that is old and worn need necessarily be abolished', writes Guido Viale in his fine book from 1994 *Un mondo usa e getta*. He went on to point out: '... trash constitutes a world of its own, complex and symmetrical to the world of merchandise. A world that, behind the mirror in which consumer civilisation loves to admire itself and create its own self-awareness, restores our understanding of the truer nature of the products that populate our everyday lives.'

The waste of industrial society and in a very particular manner, the trash produced by consumer civilisation, is in a certain sense the dross of that systematic activity of robbery and waste of the resources of the earth on which they are based. [...] The presence of trash in the world is not eliminated with the supposed elimination through the various forms of waste management. Aside from that, we should recognise its reeking presence in the noosphere,

that is, in the world of knowledge and understanding, which represents in some sense a parallel existence of trash in the heavens of the spirit, a genuine and full-fledged soul. Trash is indeed an enormous deposit of information of great value and not merely in the scientific world. [...] It is easy to say why: trash is a direct documentation, minute and incontrovertible, of the habits and forms of behaviour of those who produced it, aside from the beliefs and perceptions that they have of themselves...'

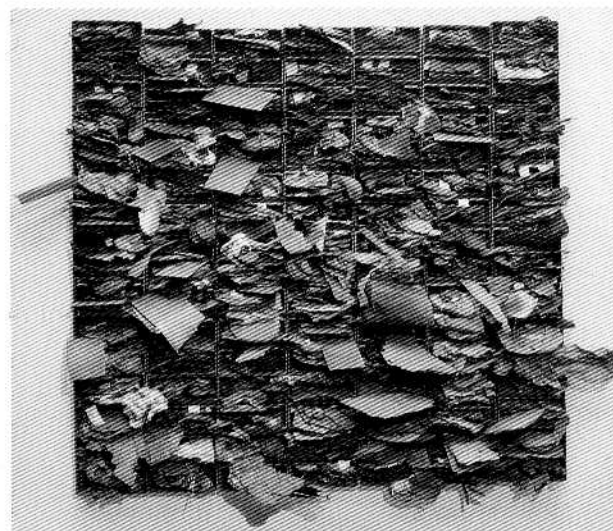
We know that trash is a commemoration of that which satisfied our needs or satiated our desires. Often, we identify with an object through an emotional attachment: sometimes the identification becomes, in a regressive manner, a surrogate for a libidinous fondness for the object, almost an introjection of that object into the ego.

While it is true that discontent is hardly a good feeling, it is nonetheless a good adviser. To preserve garbage and repropose it (whether elaborated or not) as a possible way of understanding past experiences, experiences that have been revisited—memories and not just recollections, therefore—beyond the imprint, beyond the trace, a preservation of sensation and not a reminiscence, is to create culture. A culture attains that status if it preserves a relationship with memory and uses it to transform memory.

It is possible that choosing to make use of trash is a form of revolt in the sense—as maintained by Julia Kristeva—'linked to the etymology of the word, which signifies a return and a shift'. It is possible that it is a dream of an internal freedom and that it touches our psychological structure or our political goals. Is the use of slag and dross a symptom of social abandonment of all social rules, good customs and a good conscience?

An artist, of course, is a useless figure; he is the one who produces utopia, wishes, dreams, games and pranks. He is a social error. If you spend time with trash—perhaps, even if you just think about trash—you can't emerge untouched, immune, nor do you remain the same person you were before. We also know that trash is a welter of symbols: it is risk and fascination, foretold catastrophe and seduction, the beauty of the ugly and the memory of the human. Sometimes trash is the sign of a creativity that is as threatening as it is ambiguous, since rubbish is unpredictable and there-

Leonardo Drew,
Number 33A,
1990



fore inescapable. The recovery of waste and junk by painters, sculptors and photographers is anarchistic; it is also a utopia and, as such, it coagulates and dissolves over time. And, just like utopia, it is infantile, irritating and the source of salvation. We throw away our traces; art peels their core and suggests their destiny.

Trash and Artists

In terms of the exploration of the banal, of the everyday, of the ordinary, that is, the 'background noise' that underscores our existence, nothing is too lowly to be admitted into the sacred enclosure of the artwork, where the objects are inserted, glued, plastic-coated, concealed or emphasised. The artists use the lowest ranks of reality (Robert Gober, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Fabio De Poli, Michel Paysant, Hidetoshi Nagasawa, Gabriella Benedini, Anthony Hernandez, Barbara Watson, Giulia Niccolai and Enrico Cattaneo) and redeem into language objects that have been discarded, degraded entities. With insolence, with hard-working stubbornness, in a frenzy of indifference, with an indignant furore, they dig and extract things, balancing them one against another and manipulating them.

A bloodied bandage is swollen into a metaphor (Orlan); an image of a Bosnian corpse surrounded by garbage (Cesare Fullone)



is nothing but hyperbole; and the madness becomes acute and heartrending in the piling up of inner tubes which become viscera (Carol Rama) or walls of worn suitcases (Fabio Mauri) and by discovering in them unexpected outcomes when the forms and materials have been selected by the hand of the artist.

Apparently orphaned of all emotions, these artists, instead, use them all: astonishment, sadism, pity, rancour and nostalgia. They transform objects into play (from Picasso, Tom Sachs, Jean Tinguely, Richard Wentworth, Niki de Saint-Phalle and Nam June Paik to Vedova-Mazzei and Jana Sterbak) or into lies and terribleness (Annette Lemieux, Louie Psihoyos, Barbara Watson, Cindy Sherman, Raffael Rheinsberg and Maurizio Cattelan).

Alternating with artworks and situations of ferocious irony (Tadeusz Kantor, Gerardo Di Fiore, Wolf Vostell, David Hammons and Mike Yamashita) or grotesque and macabre ones, are bursts of latent sarcasm and still other images, where the affectionate evocation is caressed by the regret for the impulses and ideals of the 1960s. In this manner, amidst products that are aesthetically or poetically unseemly (César, Ettore Colla, Claudio Cos-

ta, Gérard Deschamps, Jacques Villeglé, Otto Mühl, Robert Rauschenberg, Erik Dietman, Piero Manzoni, Carolee Schneemann, Fabio De Poli, Sabrina Sabato and Kcho), cunning citations (Sergio Dangelo or Tom Sachs or Mimmo Rotella) and sculptural frivolities (Enrica Borghi), we witness an expressive runway presentation—signs, symbols, signals—of exceptionally dramatic impact, in some case frenzied, in others hilarious: in short, a multi-voice discourse, never submissive.

Trash can be enlightening. Artists scrape away at its skin and use it as a stage setting for Metaphor, the Spirit of the Time and the Weltanschauung. Here is the echo of our years: violence, fragility, nostalgia, lacerations, a bitter heartbreak, an affable deformity, the filthy and the despairing.

The artists presented here have done more than merely patiently cultivating the infernal vocation and the heroic vilification. They mingle livid parodies with amorous elegies, civil invectives and ephemeral refinements, dark grace and miracle-working agility. This is not the poetics of undarned socks, and the world—they remind us—is not only postmodern, that is, possessed of no qualities other than relentlessness. The stories, in these artworks, become the history of loss, almost certainly the loss of the infantile and poetic dimension of the human being. Life is there as a memory, footprint, necropolis. They are specialists in 'all full', inventors of obsessive catalogues, of accumulations of minutia (Jackson MacLow, Arman, Herbert Kaufmann, Lewis Baltz, Alison Knowles, Mike Yamashita). Accumulation deprives things of meaning; we come to a void, to nothing. In order to represent Everything, we choose to depict Nothing: nothingness, trash, waste, garbage... But what is this nothing? It is a desolate wasteland, a diffuse absence or, instead, a sticky tide of prints, a biblical multitude of shadows, an infinite quantity of ghosts that are outside of us, or that multiplicity of metaphors, that army of apparitions that rises inside us?

If we look at the artworks we notice the emergence of a furious and psychotic or funereal, graveyard vein (Cindy Sherman, Andres Serrano, Louie Psihoyos, Catherine Opie, Tom Egil Jensen, Mario Giacomelli); effects of subtle satire (Robert Rauschenberg, Vedova-Mazzei, Peter Fischli and David Weiss, George Maciunas, Gabriel Orozco); an adolescent romanticism veined with lyricism



and small cruelties (Walter Dahn, Sabrina Sabato, Milan Knizak). At times, the taste for controlling desperation leads the artists to exaggerate, to exacerbate the underscorings in order to keep pace with the mercilessness of life. So that this irritant blend of the classical and the popular, of the scholarly and the trivial, begins to follow an erratic, hysterical, impervious, slightly grotesque and a bit schismatic course. The artists blend affection with cruelty, learned corruption and a Leopardian smile, the nocturnal dimension of a Hoffmann or Dostoevsky and the gay, sluttish aspect of Rabelais: in other words, a tour de force clambering up a maelstrom of grief and pain or humor, but always poetry nourished by *pietas*.

The presences that marked the last decade are also characterised by a sentimental irony that, when it is present, serves as a sort of exorcism of the End, of the great collective fear: fear of death, of a destruction that involves not only the individual but society as a whole (fear of the atomic bomb, of high technology, etc.).

These are dark plots or fables in some cases of intense ferocity (Cady Noland, Maurizio Cattelan) and in other cases, tender and ironic (Enrica Borghi, Raffaella Formenti), in yet other instances darkly epic parables of the cruelty of the everyday (David Hammons, Tom Egil Jensen).

Many of them trigger the resource of the narrative, of fabulation (Mark Dion, Matilde Trapassi, Rirkrit Tiravanija), intertwining references to plots, small pleasures that are also intended as ways of communicating the vitality of the world in which we live, flavouring the language of a renewed gay spirit of derision, driving it to cheerfully climb with agility up the junglebars of the imagination. A number of artists such as Arman or César or Spoerri have almost always made use of trash; others, such as Bourgeois, Burri, Tàpies, Rauschenberg, Beuys or Baruchello made extensive use of it in certain periods of their work; and others still made only sporadic use and only when they wished to emphasise the relationship or the narrative of objects from the garbage can (Mauri, Cattelan, Parmiggiani, Zorio, Nagasawa, etc.).

This book is neither an inventory of horrors nor a symbolist hermitage: it is not a survey of the artists who have used waste and rubbish. There have been plenty and there have been plenty more, extraordinary artists. Those that have been reproduced here were however necessary to illustrate the chosen subject. It is a procession, a disgorgement of apparitions, memorable metaphors and epiphanies, overworked or grotesque, of real life or the imaginary world. There is certainly darkness and gloom: the sacred and the abyssal alternate but are both present, despite everything, along with an archaic smile and euphoria and play and a deeply moved hilarity and a cheerful sunset gurgling.

You will leaf through a coacervate, a concentrate, a *summa* of garishly coloured relics, extremely elegant junk; progressively, the path is enriched with situations and themes until it composes an inventive intertwining with a high formal temperature.

It may be, in certain aspects, a bottomless well, a rich and unplumbable mine that allows and promises nearly endless underground itineraries, unaccustomed or outmoded hybrids.

The trends and the movements of the century are all there: Futurism, Dada, Surrealism, Fluxus and Pop. And therefore paradox and satire, tenderness and indignation, in an eccentric syncretism of the ironic, the dark, the disgusting, the rich and the obscurely happy.

The anthology—both in terms of the innocence and the cunning with which it reflects on the aesthetic use of discarded ob-

jects and for its sheer uncommonness in terms of language and structure—has the splendour of a dazzling, discontinuous dump, majestically deformed; and it is as seductive as a secular cathedral of clandestine memories.

A dump, yes, but a sublime dump.

In the dark abyss, we find inconsumable and illusionistic epiphanies and itineraries of bold night-time journeys. But this is also a metaphysical and certainly allegorical survey; and it is a rigorous interpretation of the present day. Emblematic of the condition of contemporary man, tossed into the world, overwhelmed by consumer objects, often dragged along by a senseless fate.

The years that we are looking back upon here waver between utopias and catastrophism, between the dream of a social catharsis and the sentiment of destruction, between aspiration to progress and the pleased contemplation of decadence, between visions of salvation (and even technological redemption) and the apocalypse.

The book can be read as a great metaphor for life and art itself, as if it were a short story, a diary of our time in which philology is triggered by the blinding flash of exquisite formalisms, flows and rigidities, conflicts, tensions and delightful terrors. Allegorical, picaresque and often dramatic, it is, in a certain sense, the history, melodrama and tourist guide of slag and trash.

What emerges is a spectacular raid through and tour of western art of the twentieth century, a reckless and alarming journey through our own contradictions, from which it is impossible to emerge without regrets, but also without plans and ideas, I hope. And it is precisely the multiplicity of possible forms that constitutes the point of our discourse, a point of departure through manifold readings and reflections. As the old Chinese proverb puts it, 'The darkest point is always directly under the lantern.'

Lea Vergine

Artworks